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ABSTRACT

In 1989, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges received a grant from the Ford Foundation to assist community colleges in defining their transfer rates and collecting data to support those definitions. The Center invited 240 community colleges with at least a 20% minority enrollment to participate in a Transfer Assembly. Interested institutions were asked to provide information on the number of their students (disaggregated by ethnicity) who had entered the college in fall 1984 with no prior college experience; the number of these students who had stayed at the institution long enough to attain at least 12 college credit units; and the number of that group who entered a senior institution within the ensuing 4 to 5 years. To assist the institutions, the Center staff established a definition of transfer rate which would be valid, readily understandable to the layperson, and calculable with data that would be accessible to the college staff at a reasonable cost. At the 47 colleges providing usable data in 1989, 50% of the students entering in 1984 with no prior college experience had completed 12 units, and 23% of these students had transferred to a four-year institutions by spring 1989. Data gathered in 1990 from 40 colleges revealed that among students entering in 1985, 46% had completed at least 12 units and 24% had transferred by spring 1990. The paper concludes with suggested strategies for measuring community college success in their other, non-transfer purposes. (PAA)

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DEFINING COMMUNITY COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENTS

ARTHUR M. COHEN

Paper presented at the Community College League of California Meeting (Los Angeles, CA, November 17, 1990).

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Defining Community College Achievements

Presentation to the Community College League of California Meeting,

Los Angeles November 17, 1990

Arthur M. Cohen

The transfer of students from community colleges to universities is one of the colleges' major educational missions. Other missions include preparing students for job entry or career upgrading, teaching literacy and general education, and satisfying the students' personal interests. Each educational purpose can be clearly defined. Each can and should have data brought to bear continually so that the institution's contributions may be estimated. Measuring institutional success in one area by no means diminishes the other major missions. Each type of accomplishment deserves its own indicator.

This concept of institutional success as related to students' progress is not shared universally. Some practitioners view the community colleges as they view libraries: passive resources that are available to anyone who chooses to use them at any time. According to this perception, a college has courses which anyone may take, just as a library has books which anyone may read. In both cases, there is some vaguely held notion of general benefit to a community that enjoys access to such a resource. But the value of that property can be measured by nothing more tangible than the number of people who check out books or the number of people who enroll in courses. Institutional responsibility for specific individual progress is not relevant to the indicator.

This view of college mission is often expressed; note, for example, the AACJC's slogan, "Opportunity With Excellence." When "Opportunity" is the goal, success is rightfully measured by tallying the number of courses provided, the breadth of offerings, the extent of all-hours access, the variety of locations where services may be found. The ultimate measure, then, is the percentage of the community's population that participates, the overall enrollment, similar here to the number of books circulated or the number of patrons coming through the library's doors.

Efforts to estimate community college success in propelling students towards university entrance, jobs, promotion in career fields in which they are already engaged, literacy development, or enhanced general knowledge frequently founder on these alternative conceptions of what the college actually is and does. Accordingly, information on student flow through the institution, student learning, student progress toward individually held goals is considered unnecessary or irrelevant, even dangerous because it might suggest untoward comparisons with other institutions.

To the researcher or practitioner who holds a view of the college as an active player in moving students, the search for valid definitions of institutional success is a proper course to take. The argument that no definition is valid because any definition excludes some people or some parts of the mission is certainly reasonable but the quest for reasonable measures need not await perfection; indicators of institutional outcomes can be generated. Nor is the argument that the data are not available a reasonable approach; it is feasible to collect necessary data if

the indicator for any of the missions is stated simply and elegantly. To the question of why any practitioner would want to know how well the institution is doing in any of the areas, I can only contend that a group practicing its profession deserves a vision of its specific effects. As for the danger in defining and collecting data on student progress, the evidence of many years suggests that it is more dangerous to let legislative aides, newspaper reporters, and other people outside the profession to generate their own definitions and impose them on the institutions. The college that provides no news sets itself up for bad news.

The Transfer Assembly

At the beginning of 1989, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges received a grant from the Ford Foundation to assist the community colleges of America in defining their transfer rates and in obtaining data to support those definitions. For many years the Foundation had been interested in promoting the progress of minority students through the nation's schools and on toward the baccalaureate and higher degrees. Community colleges are a link in that stream of graded education, particularly important for the minorities because sizable proportions of the underrepresented students begin their higher education careers in those colleges.

The Center staff invited 240 colleges, around one-fifth of the nation's community and junior colleges, to participate in the Assembly. Colleges with at least 20 percent minority enrollment made up the invitation list. Those colleges where the president expressed interest were asked to supply three data elements: 1) the

number of their students, disaggregated by ethnicity, who had entered the college in fall 1984 with no prior college experience; 2) the number of these who had stayed at the institution long enough to attain at least 12 college credit units; and 3) the number of that group who, within the ensuing four to five years had entered a senior institution. Around one-fourth of the invited institutions participated.

The participating colleges found few problems in supplying data elements one and two: the number of students who had entered and stayed long enough to attain 12 units; that information is usually available from college records. The problems came in finding the transfers. The Center staff assisted the institutions in obtaining the transfer data by suggesting ways for the colleges to get them from the neighboring universities, helping the institutions to match their records with university or state date files, and in general, showing how a measure of diligence could lead to success in obtaining the data. Much of the staff's time was spent in convincing college presidents, data compilers, and institutional researchers that the task was feasible and worth doing.

The definition of transfer rate that the Center established was based on the premise that any such rate must be valid, readily understandable by laymen as well as by professionals, and that the data needed to make the calculations must be accessible to the college staff without exorbitant expense. The validity of the rate concerns both the number of students transferring and the number of the students to be used in the denominator, those who might

reasonably be considered as potential transfers. In establishing the denominator, it is necessary to define a cohort, a set, a group. If the purpose of the exercise is to determine the community colleges' contribution to the progress of students who begin higher education at the college, then the group is the number who enter in a given year. Other researchers have defined a cohort as the number who were enrolled in the spring of the year but who did not return in the fall, the number who entered the university as juniors in a given year, or the number who received baccalaureate degrees in a given year. In all cases, the group is determined by picking the students who fall into the group by virtue of their participation in college either at first entry, somewhere along the way, or by having received a baccalaureate degree. The Center's cohort included those students who had entered in a given year and who had no prior college work when they matriculated. Establishing a minimum number of units attained removed from the denominator the reverse transfers, the casual drop-ins, and the students who were accepted at the university as freshmen but who stopped by the community college to take a class or two on the way.

The importance of the definition's being readily understandable is self-evident. It is not feasible to attempt to account for all the students' idiosyncrasies: Their prior grade point averages; the program of courses in which they enroll; whether they attended full time or part time; their socio-economic status, age, gender or other peculiarities. Few people within or outside the colleges have the patience to consider all these

permutations. Furthermore, if carried to the extreme, separating students by all these variables would yield as many patterns of student progress as there are students. Sometimes, displaying too much data is detrimental.

Including the students who entered in a given year, completed at least 12 units, and showed up at a university within five years allows time for the college to have had an effect. Some number of years before calculating university attendance must be allowed so that the students, most of whom attend part time, have had time to complete some course work at the community college and to enroll at the university. It is not useful to include only those students who had achieved 60 units or an associate degree because most students who transfer do so short of completing a full community college program.

The data are feasibly collected because information about the student's record at the community college is available from the registrar. The senior institution's student records can usually be obtained and matched if the college staff provides a roster of student identification numbers. These records are much more reliable than student surveys and much less expensive to access.

Limitations and Benefits

There are some limitations to using a definition of transfer rate that can be computed without great research effort and that is readily understandable. One is that it leads to an undercount of the number of students transferring. The students who transfer out of state or who take longer than five years to show up at a

university do not appear in the calculations. All students who transfer within the state may not be picked up either in cases where the community college seeks information only from its major receiving institutions and neglects those outlying universities where only a few of its students go. Using a statewide database sometimes also misses the students who transfer to private institutions.

The transfer rate calculation does not yield information useful in making comparisons between colleges. Much additional data must be gathered before one college can be said to have done a better job than another in effecting student transfer. Community demographics play a part, as do the strength and emphasis of the college's other programs. Nothing can be done about the people who insist on making interinstitutional comparisons except to say that the comparisons are not valid.

Similarly, comparisons between states cannot be reasonably made. State system policies differ greatly. Where the community colleges are seen as feeders to the state's public universities, transfer rates will be high, but where the universities tend to go it alone, another pattern results. The University of California and the California State University system demand that unless students were eligible for university entrance as freshmen, they must attain at least 56 transferable credits before they will be considered for junior level entry. In Texas, transfers may be considered at any time. Florida demands that all students pass the College Level Academic Skills Test before entering the university junior year. These differences markedly affect transfer rates

between states.

The benefits of the indigenously developed student tracking capacity center on its being within college control. When an institution has its own database and does its own calculations its spokespersons can say, "This is what we contribute to student progress." They do not have to depend on outsiders to define their mission or the success of their mission for them. The public relations value of such a capacity is enormous. The college's own calculations allow it to take the lead in periodically publicizing its success in each of its major missions. Any outsiders who choose to estimate institutional outcomes differently do so reactively. There is a great difference in public image when the external reporters are forced to confront sound institutional data as opposed to their generating figures first, thus forcing the college spokespersons to react.

A college is also in a better position to provide information that is useful for program planning when it does not depend on outsiders for data or definitions. The extramural research group may have different purposes, different reasons for collecting information. The college information system begins with the premise that the data can be used to reflect and lead program modifications; the New Directions for Community Colleges volume on "Models for Institutional Research," (MacDougall and Friedlander, 1991) and the League for Innovation in the Community College monograph, Assessing Institutional Effectiveness in Community Colleges (Doucette and Hughes, 1990) offer numerous such examples.

Still, it is useful for different institutions to calculate

program success in similar fashion. That is where an elegant definition becomes practical. Neither the internal nor the external college community has the patience to consider institutional outcomes that are excessively complex or peculiar to single colleges. When similar definitions are used across institutions their validity is more likely to be sustained. If most of the colleges in the state are using a definition of transfer rate that is calculated by dividing the number transferring within five years by the number who entered with no prior college experience and received 12 units at the institution, the single-college leader who proclaims a superior transfer rate based on a different definition, such as the number of full-time students who intended on transfer and who received associate degrees at the college, is shown up as a falsifier.

Transfer Data

Using the definition of students entering with no prior college experience in fall 1984, the Center staff was able to encourage 47 colleges to provide data on the number of that group who had completed at least 12 degree credit units by spring 1989 and had entered a university. Of the entrants, 50% had completed 12 units and 23% of that group had transferred. Beginning in spring 1990 the Center staff went back to the 47 colleges and to an additional number of colleges that had not participated in the prior year and asked again that they provide the data, this time on the students who had entered in fall 1985. By November, 1990, 40 colleges had provided the data. Of that group of entrants, 46% had

completed at least 12 degree credit units by spring 1990 and 24% had transferred. By the time the second year's effort has concluded in spring 1991 we anticipate that data will have been accessed by at least 60 colleges.

Other Indicators

Transfer rates are not the only college outcomes that can be calculated elegantly. The colleges' other major missions may also be defined. Job entry rates can be defined as the number of students who enter an occupationally related program with no prior experience working in that field, and who within two years after leaving or completing the program obtain a position in that field.

Career upgrading can be calculated as the number of students who enter an occupationally related program after already working in the field for which the program is preparing people, and who within two years advance in that same career.

Literacy development can be defined in two ways: learning to read and write better according to standard pre-and post measures; and as the change in the number of those who are tested as not qualified to enter college-level courses, but who on completion of a pattern of remedial courses qualify for entry within the college.

General education gains rest on measures of learning in general education fields as taught in the colleges; science, social sciences, humanities, fine arts, etc. This calculation demands that the college staff select and administer a general academic assessment to random samples of students each term, such as those enrolled in every Nth class section that meets on Wednesday at

10:00 AM or 7:00 PM. Then, after the assessment results are in, the students can be subdivided into categories according to the number of courses in the subfield that they have taken and the learning gains plotted cross sectionally. The same mode of sampling can yield information on the personal interest indicator, asking whether the students are receiving from the college that which they were seeking.

Summary

The Center staff will continue to assist all interested colleges in building the capacity to define their various missions elegantly, and to provide data on their achievement of those missions simply, with minimum expense. Much of this effort is a matter of explaining the value of the exercise and showing the institutions' leaders how the data may be used to their benefit. These leaders can then readily stimulate the generation of such information without seeking extramural funds and without building massive research capabilities. But the leaders must realize that college success is based on student flow.

Calculating institutional mission achievement can be done by using indigenously generated data: Student records, faculty-designed assessment batteries, intramural surveys conducted reliably with careful attention to sampling by class section. It is not necessary to engage the services of outside agencies. The Center staff is trying to work itself out of a job by helping the colleges build their own desire and capability for collecting student flow data.

Next steps for the Transfer Assembly include one more iteration of the transfer-rate exercise and continuing dissemination of the findings. Presentations will be made at the American Council on Education meeting in San Francisco in January 1991, the American Educational Research meeting in Chicago in April, the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges convention in Kansas City in April, and at the National Academic Achievement and Transfer Center meeting combined with the Center for the Study of Community Colleges' Transfer Assembly in Washington D.C. in April. These reports should be helpful in demonstrating to all who are interested that data on transfer can be accessed by the institutions themselves according to a valid readily understandable definition.

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